

At a Meeting of the
Faculty of Vassar College
held
October fourteenth, nineteen hundred eighty-one
the following
Memorial
was unanimously adopted:

Agnes Rindge Claflin was born with the century, on May 19, 1900, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She graduated magna cum laude from Radcliffe College in 1921 and came to Vassar as an instructor in 1923. She returned to Radcliffe in 1926, receiving the M.A. in 1927 and the Ph.D. in 1928. Rejoining the Vassar faculty, she became Professor in 1931. Agnes Claflin was Chairman of the Department of Art from 1944 until her retirement in 1965 and for 18 years, from 1943 to 1962, she was Director of the Vassar College Art Gallery. For the last four years before her retirement, she held the Mary Conover Mellon Chair in Art History.

Apart from her active involvement in the life and administration of the College, she maintained numerous and varied connections with outside institutions. During World War II she served as Executive Secretary and Consultant in the Art Division of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (1941-42), and continued as Consultant in the program of Cultural Relations with Latin America. In 1941, she was appointed to the Advisory Committee of the Museum of Modern Art, and served as Assistant Executive Vice President of the Museum in 1943-44. She was elected to the American Association of Museums in 1943. Beginning in 1939, she became a member of the Commission on Arts of the American Association of Colleges. A member of the College Art Association, she was its Chairman from 1945 until 1948, and on its Board of Directors from 1947 to 1951. From 1940 until 1943, she was a member of the Editorial Board of Art in America and from 1944 to 1945 President of the American Federation of Arts. She served on the Editorial Board of Magazine of Art, 1943-1951. In 1962 she was awarded an honorary degree from Wheaton College, and in 1963 the Graduate Society Medal from Radcliffe. Author of a variety of catalogue essays and articles, she also wrote two books: Sculpture and The Elder Pieter Bruegel. She died in Kingston, New York, on June 12, 1977.

This account of Agnes Claflin's career during her 42-year association with Vassar College, impressive as it is, conveys little of her unique contribution to this institution. For Agnes Claflin was an extraordinary teacher, administrator

and person. She represented the College, the art department and the profession with distinction and style. Style was her element -- an elegance of dress, speech and manner that spoke of personal choice and inner refinement: Calder jewelry, her tilted or feathery headgear, her elliptical and memorable turns of phrase all made a deep and lasting impression on those who had the good fortune to swim into her orbit. Knowing her, one gradually came to understand that grace and works figured about equally in the plan of intellectual salvation.

Just as Agnes offered herself as a living example of brilliant personal style, she had an unerring eye for it in works of art. She numbered many contemporary artists among her friends -- Alexander Calder, Eugene Berman and Pavel Tschelitchew, for example. She also bought the works of an even larger range of contemporary innovators, including women, for her own collection and for that of the Vassar College Art Gallery. She gave generously of her own collection to the gallery and believed strongly in bringing artists and their works to the College in order that students might directly confront the thoughts, ideas and issues that went into the "making" of the art of their time.

Both her sense of style and her extraordinary reach were communicated in Agnes's way of teaching; there was never anything so pedestrian as a "method." In fact, her great virtue as a teacher lay precisely in her refusal to impose any kind of system on the richness, density and intractability of the artistic material at hand. Intelligence was perhaps her only method, if one can call it that, a shining lucidity that often worked by indirection, much to the confusion of the less quick-witted of her students, the delight of the brighter ones. Her comments, inscribed in dashing hieroglyphics at a terrific tilt at the end of a quiz or term paper might be devastating: even worse might be an inscription only two paragraphs down from the top: "Could go no further: complete nonsense: Incomprehensible!" --or something of the sort. Nevertheless, one always had a second chance. Agnes was unswerving in her support of intelligence, of increasing mastery of fact and of the ability to articulate ideas and feelings on the part of her students. Although tolerant of a wide range of approaches, including some definitely not her own, she would never tolerate dullness, laziness or intellectual poncif. Gradually, almost without being aware of it, with risk and effort gladly given, the good student would develop a style of her own. It is no wonder that so many of Agnes's students went on to distinguished careers in the art world: teaching, museum work, criticism, art publishing, collecting -- the roster is an impressive one.

During the course of her chairmanship, Agnes created a department of excellence and international reputation. Among her early acquisitions were Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the noted architectural historian; Alfred Barr, founder of the Museum of Modern Art; John McAndrew, architectural historian and director of Save Venice; Richard Krautheimer, Adolf Katzenellenbogen and Wolfgang Lotz, German scholars of enormous energy, humaneness and accomplishment who later went on to other positions but always remembered their years at Vassar under Agnes's chairmanship with great vividness and affection.

Central to Agnes's inimitable discernment was her unerring ability to sort out the shoddy from the valuable in contemporary art and contemporary criticism. She could do so because of her firm grasp of traditional painting and sculpture. Knowing and responding to artists such as Bruegel, Poussin or Goya, she could turn with equanimity to the relatively unexplored aesthetic territory represented by Picasso, Mondrian or Jackson Pollock. Never did she impose her taste on anyone, student, friend or colleague; it was through the obvious depth and passion of her own commitment to the innovations of our century, her openness yet critical alertness to value or the lack of it that one was inspired to form one's own judgments of the new, the relatively unfamiliar, or even the shocking in modern art. Although Agnes always saw both the art of the past and the present as part of an ongoing tradition of excellence, she nevertheless understood that the core of the new art was precisely what was innovative and risky. Essential to her distinctive style of mind was a beautiful acceptance of risk: risk on the part of the innovative maker of art as well as that of the student confronting new forms of aesthetic expression. Agnes never believed any art, old or new, was easy, but she knew that the great work, the major artist, was always worth the effort.

In her later years, Agnes faced affliction with extraordinary gallantry, maintaining her interest in art, in people, in ideas until the end of her life. For many of us, a visit to the Claflin's house in New Paltz was a memorable event: there were pets, conversation and needlepoint available to soothe the spirit, works by Rouault, Tchelitchew and Lachaise to beguile the eye, and a sympathetic yet critical eye to go over a troublesome manuscript. For those of us who knew her, who came under her influence, who cared deeply about her, Agnes Claflin remains a part of our present day lives and work. The Vassar Art Gallery offers material mementoes of her ongoing presence in works like the personally inspired, witty and logical Agnes's Ring by Alexander Calder or George Platt Lynes' memorable profile photograph en chapeau

de paille, modern style. Her students and colleagues are a living testimonial to her continuing influence. In every sense Agnes Claflin was, and continues to be, a vital presence among us.

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Nochlin Pommer

Pamela Askew

Leila Cook Barber

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Susan Donahue Kuretsky